

Romans 9:1-29

Israel's Election

It is necessary to make two preliminary remarks. First, Rev. J.R. Wiskerke wrote two books (in Dutch) in 1966 and 1967 about Romans 9¹, giving thorough, sometimes surprising, explanations. These books offer us a treasure of biblical knowledge. True, reading and studying them takes effort, but that effort is richly rewarded. Second, we wish to advise that the Notes on the Text which follow do not say much about the individual words of the text, which we deem unnecessary, but rather try to clarify the apostle's train of thought. Much has been written about this chapter. During the time of the Liberation of 1942-1944 it was discussed in great depth, both in synodical papers and in the papers of the "concerned."² Of course we have learned much from that. It should now be possible to clarify Paul's train of thought in a simple and straight-forward way. The following is an attempt to do so.

A. Notes on the Text

Verses 1-3

The apostle is deeply moved about the people of Israel of his days, the people to whom he belongs. He would even forego the communion with Christ if that would obtain the communion for Israel. (For a similar attitude, cf. Moses in Exodus 32:30ff.)

Verses 4, 5

Paul shows first how the LORD in his abundant grace has showered the people of Israel with many privileges. He lists the following:

- (a) they are Israelites: as God's people distinguished from all other peoples;
- (b) they are adopted as children: God adopted Israel as his son (Exodus 4:22; Ezekiel 16:4-7);
- (c) they have the glory: in God's manifestations to them in the columns of smoke and fire;
- (d) the covenants: with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 (cf. Hebrews 8);
- (e) the giving of the law on Sinai (cf. Psalm 147:19,20)
- (f) the promises of redemption and especially of the Messiah;

¹ *Volk van God's roeping* (People of God's Choice), 1966; and *Geroepen volk* (Chosen people), 1967, published by Oosterbaan & LeCointre.

² *Ed. Note:* A literal translation of a term used to describe persons who were concerned about various decisions of the synods of those days. Many of them, nevertheless, did not join the Liberation, but remained under the synodical yoke.

- (g) the patriarchs: the promises accompanied the generations according to God's purpose (see Genesis 17:7: "and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come"), so that through the ages they continued to pass from parent to child; and
- (h) out of Israel has come the Christ according to the flesh. The climax shows that in Israel's redemptive history everything pointed to Christ. (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, A. 19, for the progress of the gospel from paradise to its fulfilment in Christ). This whole list of spiritual privileges makes the question all the more pressing: why is it that in Paul's days so few of the Israelites share in the fulfilment of those redemptive promises? Note that in v. 5 Christ is called GOD. This verse is, thus, a proof-text for the divinity of our Saviour.

Verse 6a

These words imply a prior question (not expressed here): Is it because God's promises lack the power of fulfilment that only a few Israelites accept Christ and his salvation, a fact readily ascertainable by Paul and everyone else? Are God's promises grandiose and pretentious, but ultimately powerless, words?

The apostle answers: no, the word of God (v. 6a contains all the privileges listed in vv. 4 and 5) did not wilt and fall like an unfertilized flower (cf. 1 Peter 1:24,25, quoting Isaiah 40:6-8). God's covenant promises have indeed done their work! They have been richly fulfilled! *Where and how?* That question is going to be answered at length by the apostle.

Verses 6b, 7

The answer begins as follows: for not all who are Israelites according to the flesh belong to the true Israel, which received the fulfilment of God's promises. Not all descendants of Abraham are called children of Abraham. In v. 6b these words are especially important: "for not all who descended from Israel are Israel." The true Israel does not include each and every Israelite. For there are two kinds of Israelites. A similar distinction is also found in 2:28,29: Israelites according to the flesh and Israelites according to the Spirit. The question now is: what is the difference between these two groups; what is it that makes an Israelite more than a mere Israelite according to the flesh?

Different answers have been given to this question by exegetes and commentators, also in the church-struggle of 1942 and later. We note two answers:

1. Some said: "Not all Israelites really received the promise of salvation; only the Israelites who were elected did." That means: there are Israelites who are not elected, and they receive only a conditional promise of salvation; but there are also Israelites who are elected, and they receive an unconditional assurance of salvation.

The condition (consisting of repentance and faith) is not met by the Israelites who are not elected, for they do not believe, and so the blessing of salvation

escapes them. But the LORD ensures that the condition is met by the Israelites who are elected, for he grants them regeneration and faith so that they are assured of receiving salvation.

Thus there are two promises: a conditional one and an unconditional one. This position was the one defended in the synodical writings.³ However, this position was rightly opposed by the "concerned": all promises of salvation, sealed by circumcision and baptism, are conditional; they are fulfilled only by faith and regeneration. Hence the idea of a two-fold promise is to be rejected.

2. Others, however, claimed: "All Israelites do indeed receive the same promise, but not all are willing to struggle in the faith for the salvation promised in it." These exegetes take the second word "Israel" in the text to mean: father Jacob who struggled at Peniel for the blessing of the promise. They read verse 6b as follows: "For not all descendants of Jacob-Israel are wrestlers for the blessing of the promise like father Jacob-Israel" (see Genesis 32:26-28). That means: there are non-believing as well as believing Israelites.⁴

In his previously mentioned book (*Volk van God's roeping*), Rev. Wiskerke agrees with this opinion, with one important correction, which I think should be accepted. That is: the legally valid promise of salvation was addressed to all Israelites. It was the one and the same promise of salvation. The *promise* applied to all, without restriction, but its *fulfillment* was restricted (not fulfilled in all). Thus, the true Israel is known by the fulfilment of God's promises. For that true Israel receives the faith necessary to inherit the blessing of the promise. That invites the question: where does this faith come from? And the answer must be (in accordance with the Heidelberg Catechism, A. 65): "from the Holy Spirit, who works faith by the preaching of the holy gospel."

That means: the true Israel is a creation of the living Word of God. God himself creates the true Israel by fulfilling his Word. For, included in the promise is the promise of the Holy Spirit, who works faith by the preaching of the word of God (see Heidelberg Catechism, A. 74, which repeats, according to Scripture, what had been said already in A. 65: the Spirit who works faith is also part of the promise). God himself takes care of a "remnant" out of the whole of Israel according to the flesh, that believes his promises. God's effective calling by the word works this faith in that part of Israel that receives salvation in the promise. Thus, in this effective calling to repentance and faith lies the *origin* of the true Israel.

Verses 8, 9

Paul continues by showing that it was already apparent in Abraham that the origin of God's people lies in the effective calling by the word of the promise: the children according to the flesh (those of Hagar and Ketura) were not the children

³ *Ed. Note:* This view was especially defended by Prof. Dr. J. Ridderbos.

⁴ *Ed. Note:* This was the opinion of the late Prof. Dr. S. Greijdanus, which was adopted by many among us.

of the promise; Isaac was the only child of the promise. He was conceived by God in the power of the promise of parents who were past the age of childbearing (see Genesis 17:17; Romans 4:16-22; Hebrews 11:11,12). In Abraham's tent God made an elective distinction between children of the flesh (that is: begotten of the will of the flesh [John 1:13]) and children of the promise (begotten by the power of God's creating promise [v. 8]). In Abraham's tent God made an elective division between children of the flesh and children of the promise. And he did this by the powerful work of his Word of promise. So this mighty Word of promise is the origin of God's true Israel. That is how powerful this Word is in its work! Verses 6-9 are now clear: the mighty word of promise created a people of God in Isaac and his descendants. The effective work of God's promise alone determined the source of the true Israel. Hence in the Scriptures Isaac and his seed are the seed of Abraham, and not Ishmael and his descendants.

Verses 10-12

"Not only that" says the apostle (v. 10). In the context of the origin of the true Israel in Abraham's tent, God's method of calling and forming his people is revealed. This method is now also followed in Isaac's tent.

However, note the further distinction: in Abraham's tent, the children (Ishmael and Isaac) were not equal in origin, but in Isaac's tent, Esau and Jacob were (v. 10). And it is now made public that the method of God's electing grace not only distinguishes between children of the flesh and children of the promise (as in Abraham's tent), but also makes elective distinction between covenant children who have the same origin.

Any difference in the future behaviour of these covenant children is not considered at all. For we read that God had already decided on such an elective distinction before the children had been born in Isaac's tent and before they could do either good or bad (v. 11). God's preference for Jacob over Esau is purely his good pleasure, grounded only in God's own will, independent of anything outside of it.

Thus. God has an elective purpose (a well-considered plan [v. 11]), to make a distinction within the circle of the covenant by effectively calling one to faith and regeneration, and bypassing another. (See Canons of Dort, I, 6 and 10, in which all of Romans 9:11-13 is quoted).

The Lord continued to deal with Jacob and his descendants and with Esau and his descendants in the history of redemption in accordance with his elective purpose. For it is pointed out in v. 13 how in Malachi's days (after the exile) God still loved Jacob (Israel) and still hated Esau (Edom). As we can read in Malachi 1, God then destroyed Edom, but in spite of recurring apostasy the LORD brought Israel back to Canaan.

Verse 13, therefore, shows that, according to Paul, the LORD in the history of the covenant and salvation continued to love Jacob and hate Esau. God in his sovereign, elective good pleasure distinguishes *within* the covenant between people of the covenant. This election is realized when God effectually calls some in the covenant to repentance and faith, but not others. The true people of God are thus created by the word of the promise (see John 1:13; 3:3,5; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).

That is how powerful God's Word of promise is! And that is how it creates an obedient people for itself!

Verses 14-18

The apostle now poses a question, because he expects an objection. When God in his elective good pleasure distinguishes between people within the covenant, the question arises: is God being *just and fair*? Is the making of the distinction not purely *arbitrary*?

But the apostle firmly rejects any argument along those lines. God's election of one person over another lacks any trace of arbitrariness, any hint of partiality and even the slightest inclination to favouritism. God in his election and reprobation is perfectly just. That is an absolute certainty for the faith according to the Scriptures! There is sovereign mercy with God (v. 15), but also a sovereign hardening of the heart, as in the case of the Pharaoh of the Exodus (vv. 17,18). It was God who hardened his heart so that he would not turn to the true God. Paul draws two conclusions from this. First, human effort (desire and walk of life) is not the reason for and cause of God's freely given mercy (v. 16). Second (in v. 18), regarding the hardening of the heart, God is fully entitled to deny someone his mercy, and even to harden his heart against God.

Verse 19-23

Paul pauses for another moment. For he hears an objection: If God himself alone, solely in accordance with his will, decrees either to save or condemn man, and if God is irresistible and invincible in this, then surely man is no longer liable and responsible for his actions? Then surely God cannot blame believers for their unbelief?

Paul reacts very sharply to this argument: would man dare to contradict God's decrees and decisions in this matter? Paul then uses the image of the potter and his clay, which he makes into beautiful vessels or into containers for garbage, as he chooses.

Note that Paul does not attempt to explain the relationship between God's sovereign election and reprobation and man's responsibility for his own actions. Why not? First, because God himself in his Word gives only his sovereign will and good pleasure as reason and cause for his election and reprobation. We can never go beyond that. The second reason why the apostle does not attempt

an explanation is that the relationship between God's sovereignty and our human responsibility is not perspicacious. God disposes for us and all men completely, while at the same time he leaves room for our own will and responsibility, so that we as people are fully responsible for our thoughts, words and deeds. Instead of puzzling and fretting about this in unbelief and doubt, we should take note of God's mercy, and praise and glorify it, as the apostle teaches in vv. 24ff.

Verses 24-29

Paul teaches that it is us, Jewish and Gentile Christians, whom God has effectually called to salvation in Christ. The calling of the Gentiles is explained as the programme of God's work of salvation by reference to Hosea (1:10 and 2:23). The Holy Spirit (who, through Paul, explains his own Old Testament words in the New Testament) applies what is said there about the ten tribes of Israel (i.e. that God in his mercy will again adopt them as his people) also to the Gentiles. For both need God's call, which is an effective call, by which God gathers for himself a believing people.

With an eye to the Jewish Christians Paul adds two quotations from Isaiah. The Holy Spirit thereby shows that the style of God's sovereign election, which did its separating and distinguishing work already in Abraham's and Isaac's tents, is still the same in Paul's days: the number of the Jews may be huge, but "only" a "remnant" of them will be saved (v. 27).

In summary: Paul has shown that God's promises of redemption are being fulfilled in Israel (v. 6a), but not in such a way that each and every descendant of Abraham receives salvation, for according to God's good pleasure, election is "only" for a "remnant" of Israel, a "rest" brought to repentance and faith by God's effectual calling (vv. 6b-29).

In chapter 11 the apostle will say more about this "remnant", in order to show that in this "remnant" "all" of Israel is saved (11:26).

Altogether it is very clear, both in Scripture and history, that the Word of God has borne fruit. By way of the covenant and election (and reprobation) the promise has been fulfilled. The implied question of v. 6a has been fully answered.

B. Main Thoughts

We will pay attention to some special points.

1. *Do not be silent about election.* In the Scriptures, God has revealed to us the wonderful mystery of his salvation and election. Some, and perhaps even many, in the church find this such a difficult matter that they prefer to remain silent about it. That is wrong. Rev. Wiskerke wrote these good words:

Therefore we realise with shame how weak the behaviour of the covenant people has been, when so often they have exchanged the careful reverence indicated for the use of every word of revelation

for a mute silence, especially regarding this topic. It is certainly not without reason that the word "election" has been called one of the most objectionable words in the vocabulary of the church, especially as experienced by the congregation, which has been called to praise all of God's glorious deeds. Many follow a policy of speaking loudly about the promises through which God, with compelling earnestness, invites men to salvation in the Messiah, but of whispering very softly when they should glory in the sovereignty of God's election in which God grants faith in the promises to whom he wills, according to his sovereign purpose. This policy of whispering very softly, or even of silence and concealment, about God's electing good pleasure does not befit the preciousness of what God has entrusted to us. We may not be ashamed of him; our mouth must be open in God's praise."⁵

2. The late Prof. B. Holwerda argued very strongly that "election" in the New Testament is often used of the act of God's election in history, so that election means that God elects people by an historical act of separation. In this respect he wanted to correct the misuse of the word which applied the word "election" to a decree of God from eternity, before the foundation of the world. He went so far as to doubt that the Scriptures ever speak of a decree of election in God's eternal counsel. Thus, according to him "election" would be "God's act in history."⁶

It is quite true that in Scripture the word "election" occurs many times as an historical act of separation and calling by God. But Scripture speaks about God's election *before* time began (Ephesians 1:4) as well as *in* history. Election before time began (from eternity) is God's purpose in his plan of salvation, the decree of election in this plan. Election in history is the execution of it. Scripturally, the word "election" can, therefore, be used in two ways. Further, even if it were true that the word "election" is used in Scripture only for God's acts of election in history, God's eternal purpose and counsel still exist behind these acts of election in history.

3. In his thesis about "Common Grace" Prof. Dr. J. Douma also paid much attention to Romans 9-11. He discussed the following:
 - (a) Romans 9-11 is about God's sovereign decree regarding personal salvation and reprobation. It is true that these chapters deal with the role of the people of Israel in the history of salvation. The holy line does not include all Israel, nor Esau, but Isaac and Jacob. But within this framework God's salvation and reprobation as well as his mercy towards some persons and his hardening of the hearts of others is discussed. The

⁵ Ed. Note: Quote is from *Geroepen Volk*, (1967), p. 101.

⁶ Ed. Note: See B. Holwerda, *De verkiezing in de Schrift: Populair wetenschappelijke bijdragen*, (1962) pp. 49-64.

personal aspect is also present (see 9:15,16,18-22,24,27; 11:4,5,7,14). The redemptive-historical aspect cannot be separated from the personal.

- (b) Romans 9-11 deals with eternal salvation and eternal perdition. Election and reprobation do not just apply to earthly and temporal blessings. They involve decisions about eternal salvation and eternal destruction (see 9:22,23). These verses deal with personal salvation or perdition with eternal effect.
 - (c) On the basis of Romans 9-11 we may speak about a certain number of elect. This means that God does not keep changing the number of elect from more to less, and vice versa. It is about a definite number of people (Canons of Dort, I, 7 and 15), in which the word "definite" means: a *well-defined* number. (See 9:11,12 and 11:25, where Paul speaks about election and reprobation before birth and life, so that the "remnant," and also "all Israel" in chapter 11, are defined personally). The Remonstrants taught that the number of the elect and reprobate is indefinite or undefined, because God has to wait and see who will and who will not believe.
4. Finally: when speaking about predestination the following are included: (a) election (b) reprobation and (c) the ways and means in and by which this election and reprobation are realised in the life of men. If we omit point (c), election and reprobation become a matter of *fate* only. Election and reprobation are realized by engaging the will and responsibility of men, especially by using the preaching of the Word, which is either accepted or rejected. We remain fully responsible for our lot. (See also the Notes to vv. 19-23, where there are also some remarks about the relationship between God's sovereign will and our responsibility. See Glossary #3.)

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